

# Close Relationships

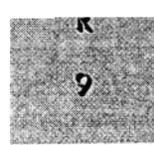
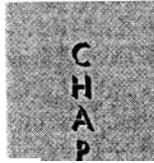
A Sourcebook

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## The Close Relationships of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals

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**D**uring recent years, relationship researchers have slowly widened the scope of their inquiry to include the close relationships of lesbians and gay men. Nonetheless, empirical research on same-sex relationships still is in its infancy. In a review of publications from 1980 to 1993, Allen and Demo (1995) found that only 3 of 312 articles in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* focused on some aspect of sexual orientation, as did only 2 of 1,209 articles in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. The past decade has seen a small but noticeable increase in research on same-sex relationships. In this chapter, we systematically review the

available scientific literature on the relationships of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

Studies of the intimate relationships of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals suffer from unique problems not faced in studies of heterosexuals. Many homosexual and bisexual individuals are not fully open about their sexual orientation and, therefore, might be reluctant to volunteer for scientific research projects. Furthermore, lacking information from marriage records and census data, researchers studying same-sex couples are limited in their ability to obtain representative samples or to estimate population characteristics. With few exceptions, the research reported in this chapter is based on convenience samples of younger white adults who currently self-identify as gay or lesbian and are in relationships with same-sex partners. Researchers often provide relatively little information about how they recruited participants or how recruitment strate-

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gies influence sample characteristics. In a review of research on gay male relationships published from 1958 to 1992, Deenen, Gijs, and van Naerssen (1995) suggested that there had been a gradual shift away from recruiting gay men in bars and toward the use of ads in gay publications, with a corresponding increase in the average age of participants and length of their relationships. Generalizations about lesbian and gay relationships must be made with caution.

We do not know the percentage of lesbians and gay men who currently are in committed relationships or the percentage who recently have experienced the loss of serious relationships through breakup or the deaths of partners. Many studies find that a majority of participants currently are in romantic relationships, with estimates ranging as high as 60% for gay men and 80% for lesbians in some samples (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Harry, 1983; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Raphael & Robinson, 1980). Also unavailable are estimates of the typical length of same-sex relationships or the frequency of long-lasting partnerships. Nonetheless, enduring relationships often have been described, especially in studies of older adults. In a recent study, 14% of the lesbian couples and 25% of the gay male couples had lived together for 10 or more years (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Today, some lesbians and gay men seek to formalize their relationships through commitment ceremonies. Others are striving to institutionalize same-sex relationships through laws and policies that recognize domestic partnerships or that would legalize same-sex marriages.

In considering the relationships of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, it is important to recognize the social climate of prejudice and discrimination that sexual minority couples confront (James & Murphy, 1998). Although Americans' attitudes about civil rights for homosexuals have become more tolerant during recent years, many people continue to condemn homosexuality and same-sex relationships (Savin-Williams, 1996). In a recent study, Jones (1996) found that hotels were

significantly less likely to make a room reservation for a same-sex couple than for an opposite-sex couple. Walters and Curran (1996) reported biased service by clerks in a shopping mall; compared to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples received slower service and experienced more incidents of staring and rude treatment. We know relatively little about how such experiences affect the daily lives of gay and lesbian couples or about the strategies that same-sex couples use to cope with homophobia.

Research on gay and lesbian relationships serves three important purposes. First, empirical research provides more accurate descriptions of the relationships of lesbians and gay men. These findings often challenge negative cultural stereotypes about same-sex couples. Second, comparisons of same-sex and heterosexual couples provide insights about the way in which relationships are influenced by gender and social roles. Third, studies of gay and lesbian samples provide valuable information about the generalizability of relationship theories, most of which have been developed and tested on heterosexual samples.

In the following sections, we consider a range of relationship issues including the initiation of same-sex relationships, satisfaction, power, the division of labor, sexuality, conflict, commitment, and the ending of relationships. We briefly review the limited research available on the relationships of bisexuals and then offer some general conclusions.

### > **Beginning a Relationship**

Research has begun to investigate how lesbians and gay men meet new relationship partners, how they initiate romantic relationships, and the qualities they seek in romantic partners. In a recent national survey of 1,266 same-sex couples, lesbians and gay men reported that they were most likely to meet potential dates through friends, at work, at bars, or at social events (Bryant & Demian, 1994). In general, opportunities to meet potential

partners might be greater for those who live in urban areas with gay and lesbian communities (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). In their efforts to meet new partners, lesbian and gay individuals might face unique challenges including societal pressures to conceal their sexual orientation, a small pool of potential partners, and limited ways in which to meet people. These factors might make it difficult to meet others with similar interests, and there is some evidence that gay male couples might have larger partner differences in age, education, and employment compared to lesbians and heterosexuals (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Note, however, that a recent study of African Americans found considerable partner similarity among both gay men and lesbians (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997).

Negotiating the initiation of a new relationship can be awkward for anyone, but lesbian and gay male individuals might have to contend with some additional issues. For example, Rose, Zand, and Cini (1993) found that many lesbian relationships followed a "friendship script" whereby two women first became friends, then fell in love, and later initiated a sexual relationship. Some women reported difficulties with this pattern of relationship development such as problems in knowing whether a relationship was shifting from friendship to romance and problems gauging the friend's possible sexual interest.

When gay men and lesbians go on dates, they might rely on fairly conventional scripts that depict a typical sequence of events for a first date (Rose et al., 1993). For example, Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) coded 95 gay men's and lesbians' accounts of typical and actual first dates. They found many common events for both gay men and lesbians (e.g., discuss plans, dress, get to know date, go to a movie, eat or drink, initiate physical contact). Men's and women's dating scripts differed in some ways, with gay men more likely than lesbians to include sexual intimacy as part of a first date (e.g., made out, had sex) and lesbians more likely than gay men to emphasize

emotions associated with the date (e.g., evaluate feelings postdate). In many ways, the scripts reported by lesbians and gay men were similar to those reported by young heterosexual adults (Rose & Frieze, 1989).

What attributes do gay males and lesbians desire in potential partners? Researchers have used two methods to answer this question: analyses of personal advertisements placed in newspapers or other media and responses to confidential questionnaires. Many studies have compared the preferences of heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men. In general, homosexuals want many of the same qualities in partners as do heterosexuals. Regardless of sexual orientation, individuals seek partners who are affectionate, dependable, and similar in interests and religious beliefs (Engel & Saracino, 1986). Gender often has a stronger influence on partner preferences than does sexual orientation (Davidson, 1991; Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Laner, 1978). In personal ads, gay and heterosexual men are more likely to request physically attractive partners than are lesbian and heterosexual women (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997; Feingold, 1990; Koestner & Wheeler, 1988). The ads of lesbian and heterosexual women describe in greater detail the personality characteristics they seek in partners as compared to the partners' physical characteristics (Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Hatala & Prehodka, 1996).

Several researchers have investigated whether gay men and lesbians prefer masculine or feminine partners, perhaps because of the stereotype that same-sex couples typically include a masculine or "butch" partner and a feminine or "femme" partner. To test this idea, researchers have coded descriptions of desired partners as "masculine" (e.g., seeks a partner who is physically strong or independent) or "feminine" (e.g., seeks a partner with long hair or who is submissive). Research generally has not supported the butch-femme stereotype. More often, gay men prefer men who are physically masculine and have traditionally masculine traits (Bailey et al., 1997; Davidson, 1991; Laner, 1978; Laner & Kamel, 1977). Research on lesbians' prefer-

ences has produced mixed results that do not clearly show strong preferences for "masculine" or "feminine" partners (Bailey et al., 1997; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Laner, 1978; Laner & Kamel, 1977).

Finally, the AIDS epidemic has prompted gay men to emphasize health in their personal advertisements. Compared to ads from the late 1970s, ads placed by gay males during the late 1980s were more likely to mention HIV status and to request sexual exclusivity (Davidson, 1991). One study found that HIV-negative men were more likely to mention the desired physical characteristics of partners, whereas HIV-positive men were more likely to mention their own physical health (Hatala, Baack, & Parmenter, 1998). Both HIV-positive and HIV-negative men preferred partners with similar HIV status.

### > Relationship Quality

Stereotypes depict gay and lesbian relationships as unhappy. In one study, heterosexual college students described gay and lesbian relationships as less satisfying, more prone to discord, and "less in love" than heterosexual relationships (Testa, Kinder, & Ironson, 1987). By contrast, empirical research has found striking similarities in the reports of love and satisfaction among contemporary lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples.

#### *Comparing Satisfaction Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Couples*

Several studies have compared gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual couples to investigate differences in the partners' love for each other and their satisfaction with their relationships. These studies either have matched homosexual and heterosexual couples on age, income, and other background characteristics that might bias the results or have controlled for these factors in statistical analyses. In an early study, Peplau and Cochran (1980) com-

pared matched samples of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, all of whom currently were in romantic/sexual relationships. Among this sample of young adults, about 60% said that they were in love with their partners, and most of the rest said that they were "uncertain" about whether they were in love. On standardized love and liking scales, the lesbians and gay men generally reported very positive feelings for their partners and rated their current relationships as highly satisfying and close. No significant differences were found among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals on any measure of relationship quality. In a recent longitudinal study of married heterosexual and cohabiting homosexual couples, Kurdek (1998b) found similar results. Controlling for age, education, income, and years cohabiting, the three types of couples did not differ in relationship satisfaction at initial testing. Over the 5 years of this study, all types of couples tended to decrease in relationship satisfaction, but no differences were found among gay, lesbian, or heterosexual couples in the rate of change in satisfaction. Several studies have replicated the finding that gay men and lesbians report as much satisfaction with their relationships as do heterosexuals (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982).

Unfortunately, virtually all studies of satisfaction in gay and lesbian relationships have been based on predominantly white samples. One exception is a survey of 398 African American lesbians and 325 African American gay men in committed relationships (Peplau et al., 1997). On average, participants had been in their relationships for more than 2 years. The majority (74% of women and 61% of men) indicated that they were in love with their partners. Only about 10% indicated that they were not in love, and the rest were unsure. In general, respondents reported high levels of closeness in their relationships, with mean scores approaching 6 on a 7-point scale. In this sample, the partners' race was unrelated to relationship satisfaction; interracial couples were no more or less satisfied, on average, than same-race couples.

Recently, researchers have begun to investigate other facets of the quality of same-sex relationships. Kurdek (1998b) predicted that gay and lesbian partners would differ from heterosexual partners in their experiences of intimacy and autonomy in their relationship. He reasoned, "If women are socialized to define themselves in terms of their relationships, then, relative to partners in married couples, those in lesbian couples should report greater intimacy" (p. 554). He assessed intimacy by self-reports of the partners' spending time together, engaging in joint activities, building identities as couples, and thinking in terms of "we" instead of "me." Analyses controlled for demographic variables. Lesbians reported significantly greater intimacy than did heterosexuals and gay men, although the effect size was small. Kurdek further predicted that if men are socialized to value independence, then gay couples should report greater autonomy than do heterosexuals. He assessed autonomy by self-reports of the partners' having major interests and friends outside of the relationships, maintaining a sense of being individuals, and making decisions on their own. Contrary to expectation, both lesbians and gay partners reported higher autonomy than did heterosexual partners.

### ***Correlates of Relationship Satisfaction Among Same-Sex Couples***

Researchers have begun to identify factors that enhance or detract from satisfaction in same-sex relationships. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay and lesbian couples appear to benefit from similarity between partners (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Consistent with social exchange theory, perceived rewards and costs also are significant predictors of happiness in same-sex relationships (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991a, 1994c). A study of lesbian relationships found support for another exchange theory prediction, that satisfaction is higher when partners are equally involved in or committed to a relationship (Peplau et al., 1982). For lesbian couples,

greater satisfaction also has been linked to perceptions of greater equity or fairness in the relationship (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996). There also might be links between the balance of power in a relationship and partners' satisfaction. Several studies of lesbians and gay men have found that satisfaction is higher when partners believe that they share relatively equally in power and decision making (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Harry, 1984; Kurdek, 1989, 1998b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b; Peplau et al., 1982).

Individual differences in values also are associated with satisfaction in gay and lesbian relationships. For example, individuals vary in the degree to which they value dyadic attachment (Peplau et al., 1978). A person is high in attachment to the extent that he or she emphasizes the importance of shared activities, spending time together, long-term commitment, and sexual exclusivity in a relationship. Lesbians and gay men who strongly value dyadic attachment in a relationship report significantly higher satisfaction, closeness, and love for their partners than do individuals who score lower on attachment values (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau et al., 1978). Individuals also can differ in the degree to which they value personal autonomy, defined as wanting to have separate friends and activities apart from one's primary relationship. Some studies have found that lesbians and gay men who place strong emphasis on autonomy report significantly lower love and satisfaction than do individuals who score lower on autonomy values (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Kurdek, 1989), but other studies have not (Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau et al., 1978).

Personality also can affect same-sex relationships. In a recent investigation, Kurdek (1997b) assessed links between the "Big Five" personality traits and relationship quality among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Neuroticism emerged as a significant predictor for all types of couples. Compared to less neurotic individuals, highly neurotic partners rated their relationships as more costly and as diverging more from their ideal

relationship standards. In another new line of work, Greenfield and Thelen (1997) showed that high scores on a measure of fear of intimacy were associated with lower relationship satisfaction among lesbians and gay men.

Recently, researchers have begun to consider how the social stigma of homosexuality might affect the relationships of lesbians and gay men. It has been suggested that the stress associated with concealing one's homosexuality can be harmful to relationship satisfaction. Three studies have provided some evidence that being known as gay to significant others such as parents, friends, and employers is associated with greater relationship satisfaction among gay men (Berger, 1990b) and lesbians (Berger, 1990b; Caron & Ulin, 1997; Murphy, 1989). By contrast, a recent analysis of a sample of 784 lesbian couples found no association between extent of disclosure of sexual orientation and relationship satisfaction (Beals & Peplau, 1999). A better understanding of this issue is needed.

### > Power

Many Americans endorse power equality as an ideal for love relationships. For example, Peplau and Cochran (1980) investigated the relationship values of matched samples of young lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals. All groups rated "having an egalitarian [equal power] relationship" as quite important. When asked what the ideal balance of power should be in their current relationships, 92% of gay men and 97% of lesbians said it should be "exactly equal." In a more recent study (Kurdek, 1995a), partners in gay and lesbian couples responded to multi-item measures assessing various facets of equality in an ideal relationship. Both lesbians and gay men rated equality as quite important, on average, although lesbians scored significantly higher on the value of equality than did gay men.

Not all couples who strive for equality achieve this ideal. In the Peplau and Cochran (1980) study, only 38% of gay men and 59%

of lesbians reported that their current relationships were "exactly equal." The percentages describing their same-sex relationships as equal in power have varied across studies. For example, equal power was reported by 60% of the gay men studied by Harry and De Vail (1978) and by 59% of the lesbians studied by Reilly and Lynch (1990).

Social exchange theory predicts that greater power accrues to the partner who has relatively greater personal resources such as education, money, and social standing. Several studies have provided empirical support for this hypothesis among gay men. Harry and colleagues found that gay men who were older and wealthier than their partners tended to have more power (Harry, 1984; Harry & De Vail, 1978). Similarly, in their large-scale study of couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded, "In gay male couples, income is an extremely important force in determining which partner will be dominant" (p. 59). For lesbians, research findings on personal resources and power are less clear-cut. In two studies, partner differences in income were significantly related to power (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; Reilly & Lynch, 1990). By contrast, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) concluded from their research, "Lesbians do not use income to establish dominance in their relationships]. They use it to avoid having one woman dependent on the other" (p. 60). Further research on the balance of power among lesbian couples is needed to clarify these inconsistent results.

A second prediction from social exchange theory is that when one person in a relationship is relatively more dependent or involved than the other, the dependent person will be at a power disadvantage. This has been called the "principle of least interest" because the less interested person tends to have more power. Studies of heterosexuals have demonstrated clearly that lopsided dependencies are linked to imbalances of power (Peplau & Campbell, 1989). To date, only one study has tested this hypothesis with same-sex couples. Among the young lesbians studied by Caldwell and Peplau (1984), there was a strong associa-

tion between unequal involvement and unequal power, with the less involved person having more power.

A further aspect of power concerns the specific tactics that partners use to influence each other. Falbo and Peplau (1980) asked lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals to describe how they influence their romantic partners to do what they want. These open-ended descriptions were reliably categorized into several influence strategies. The results led to two major conclusions. First, gender affected power tactics, but only among heterosexuals. Whereas heterosexual women were more likely to withdraw or express negative emotions, heterosexual men were more likely to use bargaining or reasoning. This sex difference did *not* emerge in comparisons of lesbians and gay men influencing their same-sex partners. Second, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, individuals who perceived themselves as relatively more powerful in their relationships tended to use persuasion and bargaining. By contrast, partners low in power tended to use withdrawal and negative emotions.

Another study comparing the intimate relationships of lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals also found that an individual's use of influence tactics depended on his or her relative power in the relationship (Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). Regardless of sexual orientation, partners with relatively less power tended to use "weak" strategies such as supplication and manipulation. Those in positions of strength were more likely to use autocratic and bullying tactics, both "strong" strategies. Furthermore, individuals with male partners (i.e., heterosexual women and gay men) were more likely to use supplication and manipulation. Similarly, Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) found that signs of conversational dominance, such as interrupting a partner in the middle of a sentence, were linked to the balance of power. Although interruption sometimes has been viewed as a male behavior, it actually was used more often by the dominant person in the relationship, regardless of that person's gender or sexual ori-

entation. Taken together, the results suggest that although some influence strategies have been stereotyped as "masculine" or "feminine," they may more correctly be seen as a reflection of power rather than gender.

### > The Division of Labor

How do gay and lesbian -couples organize their lives together? Tripp (1975) noted, "When people who are not familiar with homosexual relationships try to picture one, they almost invariably resort to a heterosexual frame of reference, raising questions about which partner is 'the man' and which 'the woman' " (p. 152). Today, most lesbians and gay men reject traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles as a model for enduring relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1983, 1984; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Most lesbians and gay men are in dual-worker relationships, so that neither partner is the exclusive breadwinner and each partner has some measure of economic independence. The most common division of labor involves flexibility, with partners sharing domestic activities or dividing tasks according to personal preferences. When Bell and Weinberg (1978) asked lesbians and gay men which partner in their relationship does the "housework," nearly 60% of lesbians and gay men said that housework was shared equally. Asked whether one partner consistently did all the "feminine tasks" or all the "masculine tasks," about 90% of lesbians and gay men said no.

In a more recent study, Kurdek (1993) compared the allocation of household labor (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning) in cohabiting gay and lesbian couples and in heterosexual married couples. None of the couples had children. Replicating other research on married couples, the wives in this study typically did the bulk of the housework. By contrast, gay and lesbian couples were likely to split tasks so that each partner performed an equal number of different activities. Gay partners

tended to arrive at equality by each partner specializing in certain tasks, whereas lesbian partners were more likely to share tasks. A study of lesbian couples raising young children found a similar pattern (Patterson, 1995). Both the biological and nonbiological mothers reported that household and decision-making activities were shared equally. There also was substantial sharing of child care activities, although the biological mothers were seen as doing somewhat more child care. In summary, although the equal sharing of household labor is not inevitable in same-sex couples, it is much more common than among heterosexuals.

### > Sexuality

Sexuality is an important part of many romantic relationships. One research goal has been to describe the frequency of sexual activity in homosexual couples and to compare same-sex and heterosexual couples. Some researchers have reported that, on average, gay male couples have sex more often than do heterosexual couples, who in turn have sex more often than do lesbian couples (Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992). In one study, for example, 46% of gay male couples reported having "sexual relations" at least three times a week, as compared to 35% of married or cohabiting heterosexual couples and 20% of lesbian couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). By contrast, a study of African Americans found no difference in reported frequencies of "having sex"<sup>1</sup> among gay male and lesbian couples (Peplau, Cochran, & Mays, 1997). These mixed results might be due to the unrepresentativeness of samples or to differences linked to ethnic background. It also is possible, however, that they reflect more fundamental problems about how to conceptualize and measure sexuality in relationships. McCormick (1994) observed that "most scientific and popular writers define sex as what people do with their genitals" (p. 34) and consider penile-vaginal intercourse to be the

"gold standard" for human sexuality. For example, in a recent survey of nearly 600 college undergraduates, 59% did not consider oral-genital contact to be "having sex" with a partner (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), and 19% thought that penile-anal contact was not "having sex." These conceptions of sexuality might be poorly suited for understanding same-sex couples and, in particular, lesbian relationships. For example, lesbians who accept common cultural definitions of terms such as *having sex* and *sexual relations* might be less likely to interpret or describe their behavior with female partners as fitting these categories. Equally important, preconceptions based on heterosexual models of sexuality might lead researchers to ignore important erotic components of same-sex relationships. New approaches to understanding sexuality in same-sex relationships are needed.

Sexual monogamy versus openness is an issue for all intimate couples. In contrast to heterosexual and lesbian couples, gay male couples are distinctive in their likelihood of having nonmonogamous relationships. For example, 82% of the gay male couples who participated in Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) study reported being nonmonogamous, compared to 28% of lesbian couples, 23% of heterosexual married couples, and 31% of heterosexual cohabiting couples. Other studies conducted during the 1970s and 1980s found similar patterns (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Blasband & Peplau, 1985; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Peplau, 1991; Peplau & Cochran, 1981). There is some evidence that the AIDS epidemic has reduced the rates of nonmonogamy among gay men (Berger, 1990a; Deenen et al., 1995; Siegel & Glassman, 1989). In contrast to gay men, most lesbians characterize their relationships as monogamous. Estimates are that 70% to 80% of lesbian couples are monogamous (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Most lesbians report that they prefer sexually exclusive relationships (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Peplau & Amaro, 1982).

The impact of nonmonogamy may differ for lesbians and gay male couples. For exam-

pie, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that, among lesbian couples, nonmonogamy was associated with less satisfaction with sex with their partners and less commitment to the relationships, whereas among gay men, outside sex was unrelated to satisfaction or commitment to the relationships. Other studies also have documented this lack of association between sexual exclusivity and relationship satisfaction among gay male couples (Biasband & Peplau, 1985; Kurdek, 1988, 1991a; Silverstein, 1981). One reason for this difference is that gay male couples are more likely than lesbians to have agreements that outside sex is permissible (Biasband & Peplau, 1985).

### > Conflict and Violence

Problems and disagreements are inevitable in close relationships. Research indicates that lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual couples are similar in how often and how intensely they report arguing (Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Comparative studies of homosexual and heterosexual relationships suggest that similar types of conflict are likely to arise. In a study of 234 gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, Kurdek (1994a) found that all three types of couples had very similar ratings of which topics they most frequently fought about, with intimacy and power issues ranked at the top and distrust ranked at the bottom. Some differences have been found between same-sex and heterosexual couples. For example, gay and lesbian couples report fighting less about money management than do heterosexual couples, perhaps because same-sex couples are less likely to merge their funds and more likely to have two incomes (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Some have suggested that same-sex couples might experience unique problems based on their shared gender role socialization (for a review, see Patterson & Schwartz, 1994). For lesbians, intimacy issues might be particularly important because women are socialized to place a strong value on closeness and inti-

macy. As one example, clinicians have described partners who become so close that personal boundaries are blurred and a healthy sense of individuality is threatened (Burch, 1986; Falco, 1991). This emphasis on closeness might be reflected in survey data showing that lesbians are more likely than gay men to report conflicts about work cutting into relationship time (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

For gay men, gender role socialization can foster competition with intimate partners (Hawkins, 1992; Shannon & Woods, 1991; but see also McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). For example, although partners in heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples all feel successful when they earn high incomes, only gay men feel even more successful when they earn more than their partners do (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Gay men are more likely than lesbians to report relationship conflicts over income differences or partners' unemployment (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1984).

How well do lesbians and gay men solve problems that arise in their relationships? In a recent study of 353 homosexual and heterosexual couples, Kurdek (1998b) found no differences in the likelihood of using positive problem-solving styles such as focusing on the problem and negotiating or compromising. Nor were differences found in the use of poor strategies such as launching personal attacks and refusing to talk to the partner (Kurdek, 1994b, 1998b). As with heterosexual couples, happy lesbian and gay male couples are more likely to use constructive problem-solving approaches than are unhappy lesbian and gay male couples (Kurdek, 1991b; Metzetal., 1994).

Recently, researchers have begun to investigate violence in same-sex relationships. Given problems of sampling and social desirability, it is impossible to accurately estimate the frequency of such violence. In recent studies, 48% of lesbian respondents and 30% to 40% of gay male respondents (Landolt & Dutton, 1997; Waldner-Haugrud, Gratch, & Magruder, 1997) reported having been victims of relationship violence. To date, most

studies of same-sex violence have focused on lesbians, but violence actually may be very similar in lesbians' and gay men's relationships. For example, lesbians and gay men report experiencing similar types of abuse, with threats, slapping, pushing, and punching being the most common (Landolt & Dutton, 1997; Waldner-Haugrud et al., 1997). Risk factors for violence in gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships also may be similar, and interviews with abused individuals suggest that battering occurs in a cycle of violence for all three types of relationships (Renzetti, 1992; Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990).

Lesbians and gay men face unique difficulties in seeking professional help for relationship violence. Reluctance to reveal their sexual orientation might deter battered individuals from contacting the police or seeking therapy (Hammond, 1989). Many professionals and social service organizations are not trained to deal effectively with same-sex couples and might underestimate the severity of abuse when it occurs in same-sex relationships (Hammond, 1989; Harris & Cook, 1994). For example, counseling students who read similar scenarios depicting abuse in either a lesbian or a heterosexual couple thought that the abuse was more violent in the heterosexual relationship (Wise & Bowman, 1997). In sum, research suggests that gay men and lesbians may face rates of relationship violence similar to those of heterosexual couples but might experience greater difficulties in getting professional help.

### > **Maintaining and Ending a Relationship**

How successful are lesbians and gay men in maintaining enduring intimate relationships? One of the few large-scale studies of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) assessed the stability of relationships over an 18-month period. For couples who already had been together for at

least 10 years, the breakup rate was quite low—less than 6%. For couples who had been together for only 2 years or less, some differences in the breakup rates were found—22% for lesbian couples, 16% for gay male couples, 17% for heterosexual cohabiting couples, and 4% for married couples. Note that the biggest difference among these short-term couples was not between heterosexual and homosexual couples but between legally married couples and other couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, who were not married. In a recent 5-year prospective study, Kurdek (1998b) reported breakup rates of 7% for married heterosexual couples, 14% for cohabiting gay male couples, and 16% for cohabiting lesbian couples. Controlling for demographic variables, both cohabiting gay and cohabiting lesbian couples were significantly more likely than married heterosexuals to break up.

### *Relationship Commitment*

Several factors affect commitment and stability. A first factor concerns positive attraction forces that make a person want to stay with a partner, such as love and satisfaction with the relationship. As noted earlier, research shows that same-sex and male-female couples typically report comparable levels of happiness in their relationships.

Second, commitment is affected by barriers that make it difficult for a person to leave a relationship (Kurdek, 1998b). Barriers include anything that increases the psychological, emotional, or financial costs of ending a relationship. Heterosexual marriage can create many barriers such as the cost of divorce, investments in joint property, concerns about children, and the wife's financial dependence on her husband. These obstacles can encourage married couples to work toward improving declining relationships rather than ending them. By contrast, gay and lesbian couples are less likely to experience comparable barriers; they cannot marry legally, are less likely to own property jointly, are less likely to have

children in common, might lack support from their families of origin, and so on.

Kurdek and Schmitt (1986b) systematically compared the attractions and barriers experienced by partners in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual cohabiting couples as well as married couples. All groups reported comparable feelings of love and satisfaction. But barriers, assessed by statements such as "Many things would prevent me from leaving my partner even if I were unhappy," did differ. Married couples reported significantly more barriers than did either gays or lesbians, and cohabiting heterosexual couples reported the fewest barriers of all. In a more recent longitudinal study, Kurdek (1998b) also found that lesbians and gay men reported fewer barriers than did heterosexuals, and he further demonstrated that barriers to leaving the relationships were a significant predictor of relationship stability over a 5-year period (see also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1992).

A third factor affecting the longevity of a relationship is the availability of alternatives. The lack of desirable alternatives typically represents a major obstacle to ending a relationship. Two studies have compared the perception of available alternatives among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, and these studies differ in their findings. One study found that lesbians and married couples reported significantly fewer alternatives than did gay men and heterosexual cohabitants (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986b). By contrast, a second study found no significant differences among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, all of whom reported having moderately poor alternatives (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986).

In summary, research suggests that gay and lesbian couples can and do have committed enduring relationships. Heterosexual and homosexual couples, on average, report similar high levels of attraction toward their partners and satisfaction with their relationships. Where couples differ, however, is in the obstacles that make it difficult to end relationships. Here, the legal and social context of marriage creates barriers to breaking up that do not typically exist for same-sex partners or for co-

habiting heterosexuals. The relative lack of barriers might make it less likely that lesbians and gay men will be trapped in hopelessly miserable and deteriorating relationships. But weaker barriers also might allow partners to end relationships that could have improved if given more time and effort. As lesbians and gay men gain greater recognition as "domestic partners," the barriers for gay and lesbian relationships might become more similar to those for heterosexuals. The impact of such trends on the stability of same-sex relationships is an important topic for further investigation.

### ***Reactions to Ending a Relationship***

The dissolution of an intimate relationship can be difficult and upsetting for anyone. The limited data currently available suggest that partners' reactions to the ending of same-sex and heterosexual relationships might be similar (Kurdek, 1997a). Kurdek (1991b) asked former partners from 26 gay male and lesbian couples about the specific emotional reactions and problems they encountered after the breakups of their relationships. The three most frequent emotional reactions were personal growth, loneliness, and relief from conflict (in that order). The three most frequently reported problems were the continuing relationship with the ex-partner, financial stress, and difficulties in getting involved with someone else. Anecdotal accounts suggest that because gay male and lesbian communities often are small, there might be pressure for ex-lovers to handle breakups tactfully and remain friends (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996).

The death of a loved partner is devastating for anyone regardless of sexual orientation, but gay men and lesbians might face unique challenges. Some researchers have speculated that the stress of bereavement might be increased if the surviving partner has concealed his or her sexual orientation and/or the true nature of their relationship so that open grieving is not possible (McDonald & Steinhorn, 1990). Inheritance laws and employment poll-

cies about bereavement leave designed for married couples can add to the burdens faced by gay men and lesbians. An emerging area of research concerns the experiences of gay men who have lost friends and partners to AIDS (Goodkin, Blaney, Tuttle, & Nelson, 1996; Martin & Dean, 1993). In the only study to focus exclusively on the loss of a romantic partner, Kemeny, Weiner, Duran, and Taylor (1995) found that recent bereavement was associated with impaired immune functioning in a sample of HIV-positive gay men. Much remains to be learned about the bereavement experiences of lesbian and gay individuals.

### **The Relationships of Bisexual Women and Men**

What are relationships like for individuals who report romantic interest in both men and women? Research on this topic is severely limited. A further complication is that the term *bisexual* has been defined in widely differing ways (for a discussion, see Fox, 1996). Some scholars use the term to refer to a presumed innate human capacity to respond to partners of both sexes, whereas others characterize a person as bisexual if his or her lifetime history of sexual attractions or behavior includes partners of both sexes. Here, we focus on individuals who self-identify as bisexual, as we did in reviewing research on the relationships of men and women who self-identify as lesbian or gay.

Bisexuals are stereotyped as having poor intimate relationships. In a recent study by Spalding and Peplau (1997), heterosexual college students read vignettes that systematically varied the gender and sexual orientation of the partners in a dating relationship. Participants perceived the bisexuals as more likely than heterosexuals to be sexually unfaithful. Bisexuals also were seen as more likely than either heterosexuals or homosexuals to give sexually transmitted diseases to partners. Lesbians and gay men also might have negative stereotypes of bisexuals, for example, believ-

ing that bisexuals are denying their "true" sexual orientation or that bisexuals are likely to desert same-sex partners for heterosexual partners (Hutchins & Ka'ahumanu, 1991; Rust, 1992, 1995).

Currently, the main source of information about bisexuals' relationships is provided by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994). Beginning during the early 1980s, they interviewed 96 male and female bisexuals who attended social functions at a San Francisco center for bisexuals and later used a mailed questionnaire to collect additional data. These participants were predominantly white, well educated, nonreligious, and sexually adventurous. Their experiences probably do not represent "typical" bisexuals. A majority (84%) of the bisexual respondents in this San Francisco sample were in couple relationships, most commonly with partners of the other sex, and 19% were in heterosexual marriages. More than 80% indicated that their longest relationships had been with partners of the other sex. These bisexuals reported that they usually met other-sex partners through friends, work, or school. By contrast, they were more likely to meet same-sex partners through what the researchers termed the "sexual underground"—bars, bathhouses, sex parties, and the like.

Available evidence suggests wide differences among bisexuals in the patterning of their intimate relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Engel & Saracino, 1986; Weinberg et al., 1994). In the San Francisco study, 80% of bisexuals characterized their current relationships as sexually open; this most often meant that the people had relatively casual sexual liaisons with other partners in addition to their primary relationships. It is likely, however, that other bisexuals prefer to have monogamous relationships. A study of 19 bisexuals, 78 gay men and lesbians, and 148 heterosexuals found no differences in the extent to which respondents believed that the ideal relationship is sexually exclusive (Engel & Saracino, 1986).

Research on the relationships of bisexuals has barely begun, and there are many possible directions for future research. For example,

how does the gender of a bisexual's partner affect the couple's relationship? Does the relationship of a bisexual woman differ on dimensions such as power, the division of labor, sexuality, and commitment if her partner is a woman as opposed to a man? A second research direction is to identify issues that might be unique to the relationships of bisexuals. As one illustration, research suggests that heterosexuals perceive bisexuals as particularly likely to be sexually unfaithful to their partners (Spalding & Peplau, 1997). How does this belief affect relationships between bisexual and heterosexual partners? Similarly, if lesbians and gay men endorse the stereotype that bisexuals are likely to abandon their same-sex lovers, then are jealousy and concerns about commitment problems in the same-sex relationships of bisexuals? Future research on the relationships of bisexual men and women can take many promising directions.

### **Final Comments**

The growing body of research on same-sex relationships leaves many questions unanswered. We know little about the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from ethnic minority and/or working class backgrounds. Similarly, a reliance on young adults as research participants means that we know little about the dating experiences of sexual minority adolescents or the relationship issues confronting middle-aged and older adults. The widely differing patterns of same-sex relationships found in non-Western cultures has received little attention from American researchers (Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, in press).

All close relationships are influenced by historical events. Several social trends affecting same-sex couples are noteworthy. First, the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the rela-

tionships of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals is poorly understood. Second, many of today's middle-aged lesbians were strongly influenced by the modern feminist movement. By contrast, the relationship attitudes of younger adults, especially those in college, might be more strongly influenced by the development of "queer theory" and by lesbian, gay, and bisexual programs on campus. Third, the efforts of gay and lesbian civil rights activists to bring about the formal recognition of same-sex domestic partnerships are changing the legal and economic conditions of gay and lesbian couples. The impact of these changes has not been studied. Fourth, the increased visibility of same-sex couples raising children suggests that researchers will need to expand their focus beyond couples to include the families created by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Finally, the prejudice and discrimination faced by lesbians and gay men has been well documented. Yet, little is known about how same-sex couples and families cope with social hostility and create supportive social networks.

Despite these limitations, several consistent themes emerge from the available research on gay and lesbian relationships (Kurdek, 1995b). Many lesbians and gay men are involved in satisfying close relationships. Contemporary same-sex couples in the United States often prize equality in their relationships and reject the model of traditional male-female marriage in favor of a model of best friendship. Comparisons of heterosexual and same-sex couples find many similarities in relationship quality and in the factors associated with satisfaction, commitment, and stability over time. Finally, efforts to apply basic relationship theories to same-sex couples have been largely successful. There is much commonality among the issues facing all close relationships, regardless of the sexual orientation of the partners.